

Conference Abstract

The Ethics and Untoward Challenges of Exhibition Loans: An Alabama Extraterrestrial in Paris and the Return? of a Native American Relic

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Abstract

Every collection, no matter its size, contains some item of antiquity that is highly valued. Loaning these items for exhibition often raises questions of ethics and the dilemma of putting a valuable artifact at risk. Sharing these prized possessions for the enjoyment of a wider audience, exposes them to a variety of potential threats in an era when public vandalism has become almost routine. The Mona Lisa hangs behind bullet-proof glass, while soldiers with assault rifles guard the entrance to the Louvre.

Nothing quite so dramatic protects the collections of the University of Alabama; nonetheless, the recent request to loan our Sylacauga Meteorite to the Paris Museum of Natural History (MNHN) came out of the blue just like the meteorite. Once famous throughout the world because of its unique status of being the only meteorite documented to have struck a person, its notoriety has gradually receded in prominence, save for meteorite aficionados or roadside-curiosity seekers. Displayed at the Alabama Museum of Natural History next to the Philco radio it grazed on impact, it was in need of some good old-fashioned PR to restore it to its former notoriety. Loaned once a year to the town of Oak-Grove near Sylacauga, where the rock struck home, it seldom, if ever, was sought for exhibition elsewhere. Indeed, the meteorite seemed almost forlorn, overshadowed by the University of Alabama's legendary football prowess and Walk of Champions.

The Moundville Duck Bowl, by comparison, is owned by the Smithsonian and housed in the National Museum of the American Indian. Like the Sylacauga Meteorite, it is an artifact of unique status, excavated from the mounds here in Alabama, and touted as our “finest representation of Native American craftsmanship.” In the early 1900’s under the auspice of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, an amateur archaeologist plundered Alabama’s Indian mounds and hauled away more than 200 artifacts from Moundville alone. Several years passed before Alabama put a stop to the looting, too late to prevent the loss of one of the most valuable discoveries in its territory.

Since 2010, the Duck Bowl has been on “indefinite loan” at the University of Alabama’s Moundville Archaeological Park after much lobbying and support from archaeological scholars and the Native American community; a hard-won agreement that was not without expense and a multitude of obstacles.

Two Alabama artifacts, both unique in their value and importance, have been made available for public appreciation. The challenge is to share them responsibly.

Keywords

collections use, ethics, threats, University of Alabama Natural History Museum, Sylacauga Meteorite, Paris Museum of Natural History, Philco radio, Duck Bowl, Smithsonian, National Museum of the American Indian, Moundville Archaeological Park, Native American

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